

CONSEQUENCES OF THE USE OF PRIVATE COACHING SYSTEM TO ENTER UNIVERSITIES: A STUDY IN SRI LANKA

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ABSTRACT

University admissions for professional degree programmes has become very competitive in many countries in the world. While students have to score high aggregate of marks at the university entrance examinations, other criteria may also have to be met. As a result, additional private coaching outside the normal high school system is being sought by the students. In certain countries private coaching system which uses modern technology and distance education has become a thriving business. In this paper, the consequences of this trend are discussed while paying attention to a study conducted in Sri Lanka. Remedial measures for the Sri Lankan situation are proposed which could be applicable to other countries as well.

1. INTRODUCTION

In Sri Lanka, conducting the secondary education system is considered as the responsibility of the government. The Department of Examinations in Sri Lanka conducts two general qualifying examinations annually, known as the General Certificate of Education (G.C.E.) at Ordinary Level and at Advanced Level, which are conducted after 11 years and 13 years of schooling respectively. These examinations are similar to the G.C.E. (London) examinations. The G.C.E. Advanced Level (A/L) Examination is considered as the university entrance examination. A parallel system of private coaching prevails throughout the country to prepare students to the G.C.E. (A/L) Examination due to the severe competition to enter universities. This problem is considered in relation to the intake to the Faculty of Engineering, University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka.

Adverse effects due to private coaching systems have been reported from other countries as well. Countries such as South Korea, India, and even United States have faced similar problems. In South Korea entrance into a prestigious university has become extremely competitive

(Korean Embassy 1990). This situation has led high school students to endless cramming and rote memorization of facts to face examinations. The students were fully occupied with private tuition classes after school till late evenings and also in weekends. Students had no opportunity to relax from the study routine. Due to the ill effects of private coaching, the government of South Korea banned these classes in nineteen eighties. However, the law has driven the private classes underground and made the fees more expensive. As a result, wealthy families got an unfair advantage in the competition.

In United States, the competitive culture puts a tremendous value on high test scores and admission to a prestigious college (Needleman 2002). Many parents spend lot of money for private coaching hoping that their child will get higher scores at entrance examinations.

The situation in India with respect to private coaching is not very different (Mumbai Reporter 1998). It appears that the traditional educational institutions do not have much role in preparing students for important examinations. The work done outside the school hours and coaching

through private tutors enable the students to succeed at these examinations. The gross commercialization of education in the recent years has further affected the regular teaching work in the class rooms ('Whither formal education?'). As a result, getting educated is once again becoming a privilege of the rich.

In Section 2 of this paper, we present a brief history of higher education in Sri Lanka with special emphasis on science based courses. In Section 3, we discuss the impact of private coaching. We mention the concerns regarding the quality of education provided by the private coaching classes, in Section 4. In Section 5, we discuss the repercussions at the university as a result of private coaching. Concluding remarks and suggestion are given in section 6.

2. Higher Education in Sri Lanka: A Brief History

2.1. Increasing Competition

Up to late nineteen sixties there was a limited number of schools conducting university entrance classes in Sri Lanka. Not all these schools had the necessary laboratory facilities to conduct classes for science subjects. The majority of the schools with good laboratory facilities were concentrated in the few major towns. Also there were some government central colleges with laboratory facilities in certain rural areas. As a result, the number of students sitting for the university entrance examination in science subjects was very limited.

Then, in early seventies the government embarked on a policy of expansion of university education. As a result, a large number of schools at the provincial level were upgraded with laboratory facilities and were allowed to conduct classes for the university entrance examination in science subjects. Consequently, higher educational opportunities were opened up for a large number of students who did not enjoy this facility earlier. Then, the competition for places in universities started showing an

upward trend, gradually over the years. The number of students who could not be admitted to universities even with the minimum stipulated marks were increasing year by year, as a result.

2.2. Language Policy

When the country won independence from the British rule in 1948, the medium of instruction in schools was English. By early 1950s the government realised the necessity to transform the language of instruction in schools to vernacular. There were two national languages Sinhala and Tamil. It was planned to implement the new policy stage by stage. However, it was soon realized that it was difficult to implement the change with respect to the science subjects. There were several reasons. Shortage of qualified teachers, text books and technical terms in vernacular were the major drawbacks. The government established the Department of Official Languages in 1956 and assigned the task of constructing new technical terms. A programme to translate text books was also initiated and certain popular text books were identified for translation into national languages. The task was a tedious one and it took several years to translate a single text book. However, there were several groups working simultaneously on translating books on different subjects. By the time these books were printed, most of them have already become outdated as the original text books have moved to their new editions. Besides, the technical terms used in translations were unfamiliar to students. The students found it extremely difficult to appreciate the material in the translated books even though they were written in the national languages. One of the reasons for this situation was that the books were compiled by incompetent translators.

As a result of these difficulties, the implementation of the new language policy for science subjects had been delayed. Some schools continued teaching in English for

some more time. It was possible to implement the language policy fully only by early seventies.

However, the language of instruction in the courses like engineering and medicine was continued in English at the universities. In the earlier system, the transition from school to university was smooth as there was no change in the medium of instruction. The students needed to have a good command of English if they were to follow the degree programmes in science based courses successfully. The teaching of English was not given prominence after the medium of instruction at schools changed to national languages. As a result, the students coming from rural areas were the most affected as most of these schools did not have competent teachers to teach English. Also, there was not much opportunity for those students to use the language outside the class room.

To help the students with language difficulties due to the change in the medium of instruction in schools, the universities started conducting intensive English courses before the academic programme starts every year. In spite of all these efforts, the language deficiency remains a major obstacle facing the majority of students to this date.

2.3. Removal of Practical Examinations

The practical examination component for science subjects had been removed from the G.C.E. (A/L) Examination in 1971 (Samuel 1992). The main reason given for this decision was that, due to the large number of candidates involved, it was difficult to organize these tests which were conducted at the university laboratories. It was a very unwise move. As a result, the teachers did not give proper attention to conduct practical sessions in schools. Ultimately, practical classes in many schools were converted to mere demonstrations by teachers. Students did not get a chance to perform experiments on their own and consequently many students lost enthusiasm in learning these subjects.

By doing away with the practical tests, students lost the opportunity to learn important aspects of understanding a subject, like method of arranging apparatus for an experiment, assembling electric circuits, taking readings and measurements, constructing tables, plotting graphs from actual readings, determining correlations among variables, investigating possible experimental errors, effect of results on changing certain parameters etc. None of these could have been learned by confining only to theoretical studies. All the above were very important components in learning an experimental subject.

2.4. Effect of Abolishing Interviews

During the early years, the candidates reaching the minimum required standards in written and practical examinations were called for a viva voce examination. With effect from the session 1960/61, the interviews were discontinued in respect of admission to courses in the Faculties of Arts and Oriental Studies (Registrar, University of Ceylon 1962). In respect of admissions to courses like engineering and medicine, interviews were conducted for few more years. For whatever reasons the interviews were abolished, the effect of this very unwise decision can be seen today. For example, every year, a fairly large number of students are admitted to universities for courses in engineering, who are not really suitable for a career in engineering due to lack of interest and talent for practical subjects etc. For the success in a professional course like engineering students should possess certain skills, attitudes and orientation towards practical applications. There is no way of determining whether a candidate satisfies these requirements just by looking at the marks scored at a written examination only. There are some students who score very high marks at the G.C.E. (A/L) but not inclined towards a profession in applied sciences like engineering, but more oriented towards doing research in pure sciences. These students realize that engineering studies are not meant for them, only when they enter the university. If the interviews

existed, these students could have been directed to studies more appropriate for them.

3. Impact of Private Coaching System

Due to the severe competition to secure the limited number of places available at the universities, especially for the science based courses with better employment opportunities, students were looking for ways to gain extra marks at the G.C.E. (A/L) Examination. The private coaching system capitalized on this situation and started conducting classes. In certain instances, several hundred students were sitting in a single class at the private coaching institutes. This trend has signalled a serious deficiency in the public school system in the country.

The numbers in the private coaching classes are so large that, teachers have to use speakers to address the students. They make full use of the advanced technology in conducting these classes. Multimedia equipment is extensively used in delivering lessons to make them more attractive. Video films and power point presentations are common. In addition, printed notes, tutorials etc. are provided. Large posters and banners in attractive colours are displayed at prominent places in towns to advertise these coaching classes. These classes are conducted in the urban areas in the country. Even in India, students in rural areas, who do not have access to a coaching centre were at a disadvantage (The Hindu, 2004).

For the benefit of the students from the remote areas of the country, distant learning methods are also being used by the organisers of the private coaching classes. These include, sending lesson material by post, which contain CDs with audio and video material. They also arrange marking of tutorials and assignments by post. Use of the internet by the private tutors is also emerging.

Even the very good students in schools used to attend these classes. Due to the severe competition to enter universities, these students fear that they will miss out something important for the examination if they do not

attend these classes. Also, there is even more competition to enter better and prestigious universities which requires very high marks.

Attendance at public schools have dropped especially during the period of few months before examinations due to the special sessions arranged by these private coaching classes which claims that they are discussing target questions for the examinations.

But, most of the students do not realise that even though the teachers at the private coaching classes may cover the syllabus of a given subject somehow, they are not able to ensure the proper learning of the topics by the students. For this, studying at a leisurely pace is needed while working sufficient number of exercises by students themselves. A class with a several hundred students does not provide a suitable environment for this. The government school system tries to improve the quality of education provided to the students by arranging in-service seminars and workshops to teachers from time to time. Despite all this, it is surprising how the private coaching system survives and indeed escalates. It appears that the use of modern technology also plays a part in attracting students to the private coaching system.

The worst thing is that, the tendency of parents to send their children to private classes outside the regular school system begins at a very young age. That means, long before they sit the O/L examination, students start private coaching. The parents little realise that what the students at the tender ages needs is a relaxing atmosphere to learn things on their own rather than spoon feeding by the private coaching masters. By putting this unnecessary burden on young children, opportunity for proper mental development of them will be greatly reduced. This is clearly seen when the students enter universities after this heavy struggle. Majority of these students have cultivated 'parrot like learning habits' and are incapable of solving even a simple problem given to them which needs some original thinking.

4. Quality of Education in Private Coaching Institutes

So far hardly any steps were taken by the government to monitor the quality of education provided by the private coaching institutes in Sri Lanka. There is no doubt that the main concern of these institutes is maximizing their profits rather than providing an education of high quality. However, students are made to feel that the only salvation for them is the education provided by them.

The private coaching system has drastically changed the study patterns of students in Sri Lanka in recent years. After school, many students directly go to these classes. Weekends also were occupied fully for private coaching. Students hardly find any time to spend on studies on their own. The working of exercises which is essential to build up the speed of answering is ignored. Only the best students will survive this process. Yet their mental development have retarded. It appears that they could have done better if they did not join this 'rat race'.

The education provided by these private institutes are highly examination oriented. Answers to a large number of questions are given at these classes. At the examination, students try to identify questions by comparing with the questions worked out at the private coaching class. There are many instances where students have written down answers by memorizing the solution to a similar problem worked out earlier. At most of these classes, students are not guided to learn the fundamentals properly. If this is done, students will get confidence to work problems from the first principles rather than by trying to memorise solutions. Therefore, it can be seen that this type of education inhibits the mental development of the student. Also, the students will be deprived of building up self-confidence and self-motivation, since they get used to 'spoon feeding' by the coaching masters. This attitude will be carried over to the university where the expected pattern of learning will be completely different. At the university, students are expected to do more and more independent studies

because the problems they encounter will be open ended rather than problems which require a fixed solution. Especially, towards latter years in the university, students will be exposed to more project oriented work. It appears that many students are unable to meet this challenge and consequently fail the examinations.

There are very few parents in Sri Lanka who could afford an additional expenditure for several years to educate their children. Yet, somehow they manage to spend for this heavy burden imposed on them. Some parents forego their other expenses, borrow money or even sell their properties. The ultimate aim is to secure a good future for their children. Their ambition is to get the children into one of the most prestigious professions in the country like engineering and medicine.

However, only less than 5% of the students appearing for the G.C.E. (A/L) Examination in Sri Lanka, end up at universities. The number of students getting admission to faculties of engineering and medicine are even less. That means, the majority of parents and students are not able fulfil these ambitions in spite of the success of the private coaching system in terms of the number of students attracted to them.

It is also interesting to note that even if there were no private coaching classes, the same number of students are admitted to universities every year. The existence of the private coaching system does not help to increase the number of students admitted to the universities. It may only change the ranking order of few students at its best. Admissions to universities depend on the rank order of marks of applicants with respect to a given course at the university. In other words, few students who could not otherwise gain admission to the universities may get in, at the expense of some others. Therefore, it is doubtful whether the private coaching system will make any useful contribution to the education in the country.

5. Repercussions at Universities

The detrimental effect of the private coaching system can be clearly seen at the university level. The cut off marks for university entry is increasing every year for many courses of study. That means, to gain entry into a university, candidates have to score higher marks at the G.C.E. (A/L) examination. Yet, the quality of students entering universities seems to be falling.

Even the students who are at the top of the ranking order find it difficult to answer questions posed to them which needs some original thinking. It is clearly seen that their minds have been conditioned in such a way that they are not able to look beyond what they have crammed up in their minds. They can memorize highly complex mathematical expressions, for instance. But they fail to explain even a simple fundamental concept in a subject. The result of this situation is alarming. Already, there are complaints from employers saying that recent university graduates lack initiative and ability for critical thinking which are essential in work places. They also find it difficult to adjust to new situations where uncertainties appear all the time .

Failure rates at the examinations in the universities have been increased in recent years. Students find it extremely difficult to fill the gap in knowledge between A/L curricula and the university. Therefore, the transition is not smooth in terms of knowledge as well as in the medium of instruction. Many students find it difficult to face these challenges. Some students somehow are able to get through the examinations for the entry, but with a considerable amount of unfilled gap of knowledge. This gap is carried forward affecting the pass rates at the subsequent examinations at the university. It can be seen that, many students carry a large amount of backlog which they cannot clear till the end of their university career. This is spilled over by failing them at the final examination too. The Faculty of Engineering at

Peradeniya has seen very high failure rates averaging up to about 40% in recent years. This situation continues by repeated failures of some candidates at the final examinations .Once they pass out, they loose the touch of the subjects and more effort is needed to score required marks at the examinations held in the subsequent years. It is very difficult to achieve this, as many students will be employed even temporarily by this time and they could not spend full time on their studies. As a solution to this situation, the Faculty of Engineering , University of Peradeniya has moved to the semester based course unit system recently. Whether the situation will improve by this means is yet to be seen.

6. Conclusion

From the foregoing discussion, it can be seen that the main reason for the thriving private tutoring system is the severe competition to secure places in the universities. One of the possible ways of releasing this pressure is to open up new universities and make more and more places available for higher education. Actually, the government of Sri Lanka is trying to do this to some extent. During the last few years, several new universities were established in the provinces. But, the cost involved is enormous, especially in establishing new faculties for science based disciplines. Considering that the scarcity of resources has adversely affected the normal functioning of even the existing faculties, expanding university education to accommodate all qualified candidates will be an impossible dream for a third world country like Sri Lanka.

Due to this, the government has allowed some private institutions to establish campuses in collaboration with some universities abroad. Due to the high course fees to be paid, it is unclear whether this measure will have a major impact on the competition to enter universities.

Another alternative is to make available other options for higher education like technical colleges and teacher

training colleges. But, the problem is that the university education is still much more attractive than other options, at the moment. Therefore, it is doubtful whether the pressure could be taken off from the current system substantially, by this means.

In order to arrest the detrimental effects produced as a result of addiction to private tutoring system by the students in science based disciplines, it is suggested to implement the following proposals.

- (1) *Re-introduce practical examinations for experimental subjects:* This will motivate students to learn these subjects thoroughly. Also, if this is implemented, many tutorials will not be able to provide proper laboratory facilities.
- (2) *Introduce continuous assessments in schools:* The contribution from this component to the G.C.E. (A/L) Examination should be substantial. As a result, good students will get a guarantee of success at the examination. Marks should also be given to the regular attendance at the school. Master teachers should be trained for this purpose and they should be properly rewarded for carrying out this task. This step will discourage tutorials because the impact they can make for the examination with their courses will be reduced. Consequently, it is expected that the tutoring system will become redundant. The government of Sri Lanka has taken some steps in this direction.
- (3) *Re-introduce viva voce examination for entry into professional courses:* This will make sure that the students will be admitted to the courses which are best suited for their talents and interests.
- (4) *Reduce the choices allowed in selecting questions at the examinations :* This step will reduce the tendency to ignore important topics which will

contribute to high failure rates at universities. At the same time, it will also force teachers at private coaching classes to be competent in all topics in a subject if they have to stay in business, which is not easy. The structure of the question papers also should be changed such that the knowledge of the fundamental concepts is tested.

If the need for students to go for private coaching classes are reduced by implementing the above suggestions, it is very likely that the problem of high failure rates at universities will also be solved to a large extent. However, few students with special difficulties may still need some private coaching to help with their studies.

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